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Shy Children in the Classroom: From Research to Educational Practice

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Abstract

Shyness is a temperamental trait characterized by wariness, fear, and self-consciousness in social situations. In elementary school, child shyness is associated with a wide range of socioemotional difficulties, including poor peer relationships (e.g., exclusion, victimization), internalizing problems (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety, depression), and academic adjustment problems (e.g., lack of engagement, poor academic performance). In the current article we particularly review recent research examining the implication of shyness in educational contexts. Topics covered include the development of shyness, why shy students might perceive the classroom as a potential threat, and the unique challenges faced by shy children at school. Further, we consider research pertaining to shy children and their teachers, including teachers' attitudes and beliefs toward childhood shyness, and the critical role of teacher–child relationships for shy children's school adjustment. Thereafter, we briefly summarize the findings from teacher-focused and child-focused intervention programs aimed to improve academic and social performance of shy children. We conclude with a short description of implications of shyness for educational practitioners and posit some directions for future research.

Keywords: classroom, shyness, social adjustment, teachers

Researchers have long been interested in the links between children's socioemotional functioning at school and their academic success (McKinney, Mason, Perkeron, & Clifford, 1975). Historically, much of this work has focused on children who either display prosocial and other positive behaviors (e.g., Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000), or children prone to externalizing problems, such as aggression and inattention (e.g., Hinshaw, 1992). However, in recent years, researchers have begun to examine the unique academic and social challenges faced by *shy* children at school (Evans, 2010).

Shyness is a temperamental trait character-

ized by wariness, fear, and self-consciousness in social situations (Rubin, Coplan, & Bowker, 2009). Goldsmith et al. (1987) provided a seminal definition of temperament as consisting of “relatively consistent, basic dispositions inherent in the person that underlie and modulate the expression of activity, reactivity, emotionality, and sociability” (p. 524). Contemporary views of temperament acknowledge that it results from interactions between biological and environmental factors (e.g., Shiner et al., 2012). Temperamental traits, including shyness, tend to be relatively stable across time—particularly from the preschool years and onward (Karevold, Ystrøm,

Coplan, Sanson, & Mathiesen, 2012; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Among younger children, shyness manifests primarily as fear and hesitancy when encountering new people (i.e., behavioral inhibition, Kagan, 1997). In older children shyness also tends to encompass embarrassment and self-consciousness in situations of perceived social evaluation (Crozier, 1995). From a motivational perspective, shy children are thought to experience an approach–avoidance conflict, whereby their eagerness to join peer activities (high social approach motivation) is suppressed by underlying fear and anxiety (high social avoidance motivation) (Coplan, Prakash, O’Neil, & Armer, 2004).

When the demands of the environment are not conducive with the needs of child’s temperament (e.g., the lack of the “goodness of fit”), adjustment difficulties may arise. For shy children, who are already predisposed to Negative Affectivity (e.g., anger, sadness, fear, physical discomfort, and recovery from distress) the school environment often appears to represent a “poor fit” (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008). In support of this notion, a growing body of empirical research suggests that shy children are at increased risk for a range of concurrent and subsequent academic and socioemotional difficulties, including internalizing problems (e.g., anxiety, depression), and negative experiences with peers (e.g., exclusion, victimization) (see Rubin et al., 2009 for an extensive review). In this review, we examine the theoretical and empirical literature pertaining to shyness in elementary school classrooms. The major purpose of this review is to describe how classroom environments are related to the adjustment of shy children in elementary grades. This review adds to the previous studies on shyness in the classroom (e.g., Evans, 2001, 2010) by considering both the characteristics of shy children, as well as teacher and classroom contributions to shy children’s school adjustment. This review is unique because it addresses the needs of shy children, and identifies the characteristics that make these children different from their non-shy peers. We also briefly summarize findings from intervention programs aimed to improve shy children’s functioning at school. Finally, we discuss implications for educational practitioners and impart directions for future research.

Why Might We Worry About Shy Children at School?

With the advent of formal schooling, the school setting provides a major additional context (after the home environment) for children’s social interaction and development. The classroom is a social context—and the mere presence of peers may elevate stress among shy children (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008) which may affect both their social competence and academic adjustment. For example, heightened social-evaluative concerns are a common marker of shyness in childhood (e.g., Crozier, 1995). This may cause shy children to ruminate on the social impression they give others, thus distracting them from class lessons. Moreover, children displaying shy, socially awkward, and anxious behaviors are more likely to be perceived by their peers as unattractive playmates and “easy marks,” and tend to be excluded from social activities (Chen, DeSouza, Chen, & Wang, 2006; Gazelle & Ladd, 2003). Children who comparatively spend more time alone in the presence of available playmates (for various reasons) tend to evoke more negative responses from peers (Coplan et al., 2013).

Shy children are prone to rate themselves as less physically attractive, less socially skilled, and less positively in general (Leary, 2001). Negative peer experiences for shy children may further evoke negative self-perceptions and lower self-esteem, as well as heightened symptoms of depression (e.g., Gazelle & Ladd, 2003). For extremely shy children, performing everyday classroom activities can present additional stress due to their negative self-perceptions (Leary & Kowalski, 1995).

In terms of academic skills, Coplan and Evans (2009) suggested that shy children’s academic performance might be affected by their lack of participation, specific use of language, performance anxiety, or lower academic engagement. Indeed, shy children tend to talk less in class, and when they do speak they make fewer comments and typically take more time to respond (Evans, 2001). Shy children’s peers may perceive this reluctance to talk as a lack of preparedness or lack of knowledge, which may contribute to further social exclusion. Consequently, shy children often “participate” in group activities by simply watching others (Coplan et al., 2004), which in turn

limits their opportunities for learning and mastering academic tasks.

Elevated levels of anxiety and self-consciousness might also contribute to the test performance of shy children, particularly in testing situations requiring demonstration of expressive vocabulary skills (e.g., Coplan & Evans, 2009, for a review). Curby, Rudasill, Edwards, and Perez-Edgar (2011) suggest that shy children typically need more instructional feedback and teacher encouragement, to maintain social and academic engagement in a classroom. Of note, language skills may serve a protective function in the socioemotional functioning of shy children (Coplan & Weeks, 2009). For example, Coplan and Armer (2005) found out that shy children with greater expressive vocabulary skills had higher self-perception and lower risk for psychological maladjustment. However, it has also been suggested that better language skills may actually increase shy children's dependence on teachers, by enabling their ability to communicate with teachers in ways that may seem needy or unnecessary (Rudasill, Rimm-Kaufman, Justice, & Pence, 2006).

Notwithstanding, there is at least some evidence to suggest that teacher ratings of shy children's academic performance and skills are more negative compared with children's performance on standardized tests' results (e.g., Hughes & Coplan, 2010). In this regard, it has been suggested that teachers might attribute poorer academic performance in shy children to their lower behavioral engagement in class and perceive less participating children as less academically successful. The testing environment may also be an important factor to consider (Crozier, & Perkins, 2002). For example, Crozier and Hostettler (2003) found that shy children performed significantly worse than non-shy children when tests were administered in face-to-face situations, as compared to standard administration. Awareness of these issues may assist teachers in determining optimal testing environments for shy children to "show what they know."

Shy Children and Teachers

There is some evidence pointing to the important role teachers can play in shy children's behavior and development in school. It has been suggested that teachers establish the classroom ecology via

interactions with students and classroom management style (Brophy & Good, 1974). The influence that teachers have on shy children may depend on their awareness of shyness as a problem, as well as their classroom management demands.

Teachers work constantly to manage multiple demands in the classroom, and they may not always have the resources or time to intervene in every situation that arises. As a result, many teachers feel unprepared to effectively manage the classroom environment, and this deficit is likely to affect their ability to assist all children (Aloe et al., 2014). Rather, the children receiving primacy in teacher attention are those displaying behavior that is disruptive or noticeable and hindering others' learning (Dobbs & Arnold, 2009).

Indeed, the current literature provides mixed findings on teachers' awareness of shyness in the classroom. Some research suggests shy children tend to go unnoticed by teachers, perhaps because of their quiet nature and decreased likelihood of being disruptive during class activities (Rimm-Kaufman & Kagan, 2005). Coplan and Prakash (2003) observed preschool teachers and children during teacher-supervised free play and found that children who most frequently received initiations from teachers were also the most shy and anxious (as compared with children who initiated interaction with teachers or spent less time with teachers). Similarly, kindergarten teachers report that they would anticipate serious social and academic costs for shyness and would be likely to intervene in responses to such behaviors (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007). Most recently, Coplan, Bullock, Archbell, and Bosacki (2015) reported that preschool teachers anticipated quite negative social and academic outcomes for shy young children in their classrooms (as compared to other common types of "misbehaviors" in the classroom). However, among teachers of older children, Rudasill and colleagues have reported that shy children tend to receive fewer teacher-initiated interactions (Rudasill, 2011; Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009).

Teachers' perceptions of students have been connected to students' interactions with peers (e.g., Rudasill, Niehaus, Buhs, & White, 2013), suggesting that students seem to be aware of teachers' beliefs toward other students, and that they may behave in accordance with these beliefs. With this in mind, perhaps most

concerning is elementary school teachers' apparent tendency to attribute lower *intelligence* to shy children (Coplan et al., 2013). Indeed, it has been suggested that children's verbal participation may influence teachers' perceptions of intelligence (Gordon & Thomas, 1967), which may make it difficult for shy children to demonstrate knowledge. This negative academic attribution puts shy children of all ages at risk for creating a *self-fulfilling prophecy* (Jussim & Harber, 2005), whereby the teachers' expectations negatively affect shy children's views of themselves, which could perpetuate a downward spiral in academic performance.

There is some evidence that children's shyness is linked to the quality of their relationships with teachers. A close teacher-child relationship consists of warm and open interactions between the teacher and the child, and is predictive of positive school outcomes among all children (Hamre & Pianta, 2001). Although shy children typically have low levels of conflict with their teachers (e.g., Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009), they also tend to form less close and more dependent relationships with their teachers (e.g., Rudasill & Rimm-Kaufman, 2009; Rudasill et al., 2006). Dependent teacher-child relationships have been associated with teacher-rated child anxiety, asocial behavior, and peer exclusion (Arbeau et al., 2010). Of note, there is some evidence to suggest that close teacher-child relationships can serve to *buffer* a shy child from negative outcomes in schools, whereas dependent teacher-child relationships appear to play an exacerbating role (Arbeau, Coplan, & Weeks, 2010).

Shy children may also be particularly sensitive to the emotional climate of the classroom (Gazelle, 2006). Classrooms high in quality and emotional climate might help shy children to maintain their focus and improve cognitive thinking. In contrast, classrooms with low quality might be detrimental, because they lack the potential to compensate for temperamental vulnerabilities of shy children (Gazelle, 2006). Thus, it is particularly important for teachers to understand how shyness might be manifested in the classroom to create classroom environments that can diminish negative adjustment outcomes for shy students (e.g., O'Connor, Cappella, McCormick, & McClowry, in press).

Implications for Educational Practice

In terms of implications for educational practice, there are a myriad of specific strategies that have been forwarded and evaluated in previous research that may aid the social and academic development of shy children, including practices related to increasing teachers' awareness about shyness, described above. For example, when teachers ask fewer direct questions, and instead make personal comments, shy children tend to increase their verbal participation (Evans & Biebert, 1992). Moreover, when shy children are gradually exposed to potentially intimidating task (such as making a class presentation), and teachers *scaffold* and praised with each successive step, shy children show improved academic and social performance (O'Connor et al., in press). Such approaches are reminiscent of graduated exposure techniques, which can reduce stress of shy children (see Cappe & Alden, 1986). Further, Henderson and Fox (1998) recommend that teachers provide shy children with more activity choices, and suggest discussing upcoming changes to routine in advance to allow shy children to mentally prepare. Finally, Evans (2001) interviewed Grade 1 teachers regarding the strategies used in their classroom that seem to increase comfort levels of shy children and promote verbal participation. Teachers indicated that they would ask shy children easy questions that they could answer (to increase child confidence), ask questions to shy children first (to ensure they would not be "cut off" by vocal students), and establishing a personal relationship with shy children to increase a positive and trusting relationship. Improving teaching strategies takes effort, but applying learner-centered techniques can maximize learning for shy children, while minimizing their anxiety and tension.

Implications for practice can also be drawn from previous intervention programs designed to assist shy and anxious children. Child-focused intervention studies specifically designed for shy children are surprisingly rare. However, there is some evidence that social skills training (SST) may be a promising approach. For example, Coplan, Schneider, Matheson, and Graham (2010) evaluated a social skills based early intervention, designed to assist extremely inhibited preschoolers. SST provided initial free play, circle time

(where social behavior and relaxation techniques were discussed), and songs or games to convey social skills instruction. Leaders prompted modeling, and reinforced specific social skills such as initiating conversations and approaching another child. In this study, children in the SST sessions demonstrated significant post-intervention decrease in observed socially wary behaviors and increased socially competent behaviors at preschool, compared with children in the control or waitlist condition. It may be possible for teachers to incorporate SST during circle time or other daily activities, and use strategies during free play to model and reinforce social skills.

Friends for Children is a cognitive-behavioral intervention program designed and validated as a group-based treatment for clinically anxious children (Shortt, Barrett, & Fox, 2001). This program assists children in learning important skills and techniques to help manage anxiety. As shy children often experience anxiety, these programs may prove beneficial to them. Techniques in these programs include relaxation, cognitive restructuring (turning “negative red thoughts” into “positive green thoughts”), attention training, parent-assisted exposure, and peer support. Barrett and Turner (2001) examined the integration of the *Friends for Children* program into a school setting for children ages 10–12 (where the teachers were trained as leaders), and found significantly reduced self-rated anxiety of children post-program, compared with children in a standard curriculum control group. This study demonstrates that intervention programs aimed at reducing anxiety can be effectively delivered in a school-based population and integrated into a school curriculum.

Recently, O'Connor, Cappella, McCormick, and McClowry (in press) tested the efficacy of a temperament-based social-emotional learning skills program (*INSIGHTS into Children's Temperament* or *INSIGHTS*) where teachers and children learn about individual differences in temperament, and teachers are given strategies to potentiate interactions with shy children for optimal outcomes. Results indicated that shy children performed better on assessments of critical thinking and math skills when in *INSIGHTS* classrooms, compared with control classrooms using a supplemental reading program. Because of the strong research design used in the test of efficacy

of *INSIGHTS* (e.g., a randomized trial), the findings from this study can be interpreted causally, thus providing additional evidence for the efficacy of temperament-based intervention programs on students' achievement through improving their behavioral engagement.

Finally, educating teachers about child shyness, associated adjustment issues, as well as special techniques to help shy children (SST/*Friends for Children*) could prove to be a powerful way to provide teachers with the tools to help shy children (Coplan & Arbeau, 2008). For example, Rapee et al. (2005) reported that parents who participated in techniques and interventions to assist their shy child found a significant reduction in their child's anxiety one year later. Therefore, if teachers incorporate teaching strategies into the classroom that are geared toward shy children, teachers may be able to improve the well-being and future adjustment of these children. Indeed, shy children in classrooms where teachers were trained to identify shyness in children and mitigate anxiety-provoking experiences for shy children evidenced more behavioral engagement and better critical thinking and math skills than their shy peers in other classrooms (O'Connor et al., in press).

Emphases for Educational Practitioners

Collectively, evidence highlights important implications for educational practice. First, research on shyness in the classroom demonstrates that shyness is indeed a risk factor for children's academic and social adjustment at kindergarten and elementary school. Most traditional school-readiness models emphasize development of academic abilities and skills in children, and tend to underestimate the importance of social skills and competences (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). Therefore, it seems particularly important to devote time and effort to helping shy children to develop social skills to facilitate their successful adjustment in school.

In addition, shy students need more support during transitions to new school environments. The transition to formal school and from elementary to middle school can be very stressful for all students (e.g., Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). The kindergarten transition is laden with new experiences and new people, rendering it a

particularly taxing time for shy children (Arbeau & Coplan, 2007). The transition to middle school often means an adjustment to a large, more impersonal environment where there are fewer close connections with important adults (Niehaus, Rudasill, & Rakes, 2012). At both of these transition points it is important to bring together parents, teachers, and school personnel to create familiarity and small school communities that facilitate learning and adjustment. Current research indicates that school connectedness (e.g., “feeling close to people at school”) decreases the risk of adjustment problems in middle school students over and above perceived teacher and peer support (e.g., Niehaus et al., 2012). Thus, further examination of this effect for shy students is necessary.

Several directions for future research with relevant implications for educational practice are also evident. For example, current research on shyness is moving toward examining the role of various *exacerbating* and *protective* factors that may moderate relations between shyness and indices of school adjustment. For example, child characteristics that serve protective roles for shy children include sociocommunicative skills (e.g., Coplan & Weeks, 2009), social competence (e.g., Markovic & Bowker, 2014), and temperamental differences including emotional regulation and attention focusing (Rudasill & Konold, 2008). Future work should examine how improving self-regulation may contribute to better behavioral and emotional adjustment for shy children. Also, future research can draw from Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory to evaluate the effects of classroom microsystems on social and academic adjustment of shy children (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1997). For example, a shy child may have less positive academic adjustment in a classroom with low levels of emotional support (such as low teacher warmth and responsiveness to children’s needs), whereas a classroom with a high level of emotional support may allow a shy child to thrive.

Certain limitations also must be taken into account with future research. First, few studies have considered how shyness and adjustment are associated in non-European American or low SES samples (see O’Connor et al., in press for an exception). It has been noted that negative environmental factors including family income, parent education, neighborhood, and quality of parenting are related to lower effortful control in children

(Lengua, Honorado, & Bush, 2007). It also should be noted that shyness might develop along with learning disabilities or language delays. Future research should consider how broader environmental factors and personal characteristics contribute to social and academic adjustment of shy children. The studies with increased complexity in designs that assess individual (shyness, anxious withdrawal), relationship (mutual friendships, perceived support), and group characteristics (rejection, victimization) reflect this emerging trend (Oh et al., 2008; Booth-LaForce & Oxford, 2008).

Finally, there is a growing literature examining the construct of shyness across cultures (Chen, 2010). For example, in traditional Chinese society, wariness and behavioral restraint may be more positively evaluated and encouraged, viewed as indicators of social maturity, mastery, and understanding. However, as a result of the rapid ongoing change in Chinese society (e.g., toward a market-oriented economy), the adaptive value of shy behavior in China appears to be declining (Chen, Cen, Li, & He, 2005). It will be important for future researchers to directly examine the role of culture in the display and implications of shy behaviors in the North American classroom.

In conclusion, previous research on shyness has contributed to our knowledge on concomitants and consequences on development of shyness in childhood. However, currently there are relatively few studies on intervention of shyness. Development of intervention programs tailored to the needs of shy children can significantly improve their well-being at school. Raising awareness of shyness among parents, teachers, and educational practitioners can result in better services and eventually better outcomes for shy children.

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